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ABSTRACT

Information on the need for and effectiveness of separate course sections for limited-English-speaking college students in basic oral communication courses is presented. The information was gathered from 3 sources: (1) a survey of 137 instutions granting graduate degrees in communication arts and sciences; (2) a survey of enrollees in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) exclusive sections at Indiana University (IU); and (3) research findings concerning the effects of exclusive versus mainstream classrooms on the oral communication development of ESL students. It was found that of the institutions surveyed, only 14 of the 133 institutions offering multiple-section courses had exclusive sections for ESL students. Only a small additional number expressed support for exclusive sections. Arguments supporting mainstreaming generally cite a need for early social integration. Most IU students surveyed expressed strong opposition to mixed sections. Research findings generally did not support the assumption that students learn English better in a mixed group. A variety of approaches, instructional ideas, and classroom issues for consideration in teaching a specialized ESL section are included. (MSE)

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Should There Be Exclusive Sections of the Basic Oral Communication Course for ESL Students?

by

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World Communication Association Convention

Singapore

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During recent years, an ever-increasing number of international students have been attending U.S. colleges and universities. OPEN DOORS 1987-88: REPORT ON INTERNATIONAL EDUCATIONAL EXCHANGE, notes that the '87-'88 foreign student enrollment in the United States had risen to 356,187, of which nearly 140,000 were undergraduates at 2,552 institutions, and the vast majority of them were ESL students.[1] Over fifty percent of the foreign students are from Asia; the top five nations in order of number are (1) Taiwan, (2) Peoples Republic of China, (3) India, (4) Korea, and (5) Malaysia. Last year four of every six foreign undergraduate students in the U.S. came from Asia; 17.2% of them were from East Asia alone.[2]

While many, especially from such areas as Southeast Asia and Central America, are refugees or permanent immigrants, the vast majority are sojourner students who are here to receive higher education and then return to their native countries; this is evidenced in that over three quarters of them received their primary source of funding outside the United States.[3]

Notwithstanding recent unfortunate events in Beijing, we want to acquaint them with principles and practices of our culture, but a more direct responsibility, it seems, is to enhance their communicative proficiency early-on so they can effectively interact with professors and classmates during their entire educational process. Much toward this end is done in the Intensive English Language Programs at

some 300 colleges and universities throughout the country, along with other ESL operations in English and related departments.

The communication courses which international students take in preparation for their specializations are often limited or prescribed by their major departments or schools. Sixty percent of all foreign students are in engineering, science, and business/management related schools; these are academic areas which usually require only our large, basic service courses in oral communication, frequently ones of a performance nature. In these proscribed circumstances in which international students do take courses with us, it is incumbent upon us to cooperate with other programs on our campuses to meet the needs of those students as well as we can while staying within the objectives and requirements of our respective speech communication curricula.

The issues addressed in this study were broached when five years ago the director of the large basic course at Indiana University, Indianapolis, proposed that we establish a separate section for international students. The Department "experimentally" implemented one exclusive section for each semester. As the section is not compulsory, not all international students take it. The section enrolls a total of thirty to thirty-five students per year; our admission requirement is that their TOFL scores qualify them for basic English composition, which also has exclusive ESL sections. Some enrollees in our

exclusive section of basic speech communication precede it electively with our Voice and Diction course taught by the same instructor. To give a clearer perspective on the issues involved in this situation, information was gathered and included forthwith is some information from (1) a nationwide questionnaire concerning exclusive sections of basic oral communication, (2) questionnaire of ESL enrollees in Fall, 1988, and Spring, 1989, exclusive sections at IU Indianapolis, and (3) additional research findings concerning the effects of exclusive vis-a-vis mainstream classrooms on the oral communication development of ESL undergraduate students.[4]

Early in 1989, a brief questionnaire was distributed to 245 colleges and universities in the 1988 SPEECH COMMUNICATION DIRECTORY'S "List of Institutions Granting Graduate Degrees in Communication Arts and Sciences." One hundred thirty-seven institutions from forty-four states responded. One hundred thirty-three had multiple-section courses. Of these, only fourteen communication departments had exclusive sections for ESL students while one hundred nineteen did not.

In responding to the open-ended portions of the survey, twenty-three expressed support for exclusive sections; thirty-five expressed various degrees of opposition to such sections; and forty others made neutral, related observations concerning such matters as resource needs,

faculty expertise, and procedures for addressing ESL issues at their institutions.

One strong advantage that proponents of mainstreaming advanced repeatedly was that international students and U.S. students should integrate in such classes in order to learn more about each other and their respective cultures. Respondents asserted that the "need to interact, understand communication between cultures is desirable for both ESL and American students to experience;" and the "integration of different cultures is a valuable learning experience;" and the "preparing [of] speeches for American audiences and listening to the speeches of Americans contribute to both cultural adjustment and to development of communication skills."

There is little doubt that ESL students and native speakers do need cultural adjustment and mutual understanding; and intercultural communication courses appear good for that. Further, some opportunity for intercultural learning is afforded through mainstreaming in the basic courses discussed herein. However, over and above the prospect for cultural exchange in basic communication sections is the preparation of the ESL students for communicative interaction both in oral communication classrooms and all the others into which they will matriculate as undergraduates. Remember, most are sojourners who wish to maximize learning toward specific degrees and who do not seek complete acculturation.

One of the recognized objectives of lower-level performance courses is to help students overcome reticence in oral communication--to help students develop poise and confidence for human interaction. Reticence in students speaking and learning a second language is necessarily magnified in an oral communication class--they are participating in a class in which the vehicle to be refined, i.e. English speech, is a given, used throughout the native speakers' lives. While those ESL students who have gained considerable proficiency can undoubtedly derive great benefit from being a small minority in a mainstreamed oral communication class, the psychological pressure upon the ESL student with less-than-superior proficiency becomes geometrically greater because of unique, fundamental language needs. Lessening the perceived pressure by being in a section with all or nearly all ESL enrollees, the international students might learn the curricular requirements of the oral communication course while at the same time giving more attention to their unique needs. In this situation, they not only can negotiate the pressures of the <u>speech</u> class but they better can prepare themselves to clear specific oral communication hurdles in later courses--especially courses requiring interaction or sharing of thoughts between students and professor or among students. Young Yun Kim noted that "excessive conformity pressure in a given environment can be too severe for strangers to manage, intensifying their already acute cross-cultural stress,

thus, impairing their adaptive communicative activities. Such excessive conformity pressure may be felt by exchange students, for instance, who realize that their academic competence is ignored by their fellow classmates due to the language barrier.[5]

Although the sample was limited to recent IU Indianapolis ESL student population, the questionnaire circulated anonymously among the thirty students in our exclusive section in Fall 1988 and Spring 1989 at least tended to suggest the reluctance of those students to confront the psychological pressures of mixed speech communication classes. Of the thirty, all but two expressed strong opposition to mixed sections. Representative of their answers endorsing exclusive oral communication classes were:

1. "International students need a special system . . . [so] they will feel more comfortable. Teacher should be specially trained for this purpose as the one we have right now."

2. "In that way no one stands at an advantage."

3. "Their comparison with other students is less."

4. "It [mixed class] creates competition and doesn't give foreign students a chance."

5. "The international student [would] feel left out because there would not [be] anybody . . . wors[e] than he."

6. "Because language problem will let international student [feel] not comfortable. Probably the instructor will ignore international student."

7. "Foreign students would not feel right in this atmosphere."

8. "We feel more comfortable [in the exclusive section]..."

The preceding comments are about subjective "student feelings," but such feelings of pressure can stand in the way of learning to interact, and learning communication in the target language might not come as readily in mixed classes as in exclusive ones because of such stress. In their study on social support and life stress, Albrecht and Adelman tell us that "individuals will be most likely to perceive that those who share a stressful context will be more helpful as sources of support than those who do not share the context, provided that the stressful conditions are seen as reversible to some degree."[6]

The importance of a support system for those sharing the stressful context also was noted by Edith Churchman in

an article on "Developing a Public Speaking Course for Non-Native Speakers of English." She enumerated that "(1) students often translate for each other during the class session; and (2) students feel less intimidated when surrounded by people with whom they are familiar." She proceeded to note sociological findings that "helping one another is a way of survival. Unless one has experienced this, it is difficult to comprehend and to equate this with our particular code of ethics."[7]

A degree of independence is, of course, vital to our academic process; but shared contexts and enforcement for learning oral communication appear feasible without violating academic codes. In sections in which speech communication is being taught to clusters of ESL students, the essence of the American cultural and value system can be instilled and enforced concomitantly.

A vitally related presumption by the speech communication respondents to the questionnaire was that the English language could be learned better through mainstreaming than through separate sections. This view was expressed by comments that "isolating international students retards their acquisition of English skills;" and "[mainstreaming] contributes . . . to development of communication skills;" and "with integrated sections the foreign students have an opportunity to learn from the native English speaking students in the classroom . . . . 'Separateness' precludes this type of learning."

Research experiments which contrast mixed and unmixed classes, tend to mitigate against this assertion that ESL students really learn oral English better in the mixed classroom context. Instead second language learners often withdraw from communication in mixed classrooms. The more practice they have with the target language, the more at ease they can be in classroom participation. Upon synthesizing studies on mixed and unmixed ESL classrooms, Craig Chaudron concluded that "there is clear evidence that in mixed classrooms second language learners risk being less involved in instructionally relevant interactions."[8] Other research also has shown that non-native speakers become more proficient with the target language in early stages of their academic sojourns when they remain exclusively or predominantly with peer ESL learners. Measures of their enhanced language proficiency include negotiation of meaning and productivity of target language phrases. In exclusive classes it has been demonstrated that nonnative speakers do seek meaning more and produce more words and phrases. Veronis and Gass in a 1985 study of "Nonnative/Nonnative Conversations: A Model for the Negotiation of Meaning," showed that NNS-NNS interactions involved more meaning-negotiating exchanges than NS-NNS interactions. They argued that NNS's "feel more free with one another to indicate noncomprehension and negotiate for meaning."[9]

In the same NNS-NNS environment, more words are produced as well. Porter, in 1986, conducted experiments

with dyads and triads of adult intermediate and advanced NNS's and NS's. Learners produced more words with nonnative-speaking peers than with NS's on problem-solving tasks.[10]

Likewise, Rulon and MCreary in a 1986 study of "Negotiation of Content," affirmed that nonnative speaking peer groups produced significantly more confirmation and clarification checks. They concluded that peer group discussion may be the best way to promote interaction as a means of attaining the acquisition.[11] In short, they develop a proficiency that prepares them for mainstreamed classes.

Studies demonstrating the advantages of NNS-NNS classes in language-learning generally have one element in common. They feature performance assignments with communicative interaction, especially dyads and triads. Basic courses in speech communication sometimes emphasize interaction performance assignments such as interpersonal dyads and/or small group discussion and/or debate. In precisely such tasks, experiments have shown significant improvement in ESL students' oral communication proficiency. In her 1986 studies on task differentials, Patricia Duff compared a variety of interaction variables in problem-solving discussion and debate tasks and discovered significant advantages to each: the discussions generated such factors as more referential questions and confirmation checks, while

debates generated more words per turn and more complex phraseology than the discussions.

If the instructors of hybrid basic communication courses could provide essentially the same theoretical substance for clusters of ESL students, while at the same time addressing their special needs, then separate sections appear warranted and should be established. On the other hand, if the individual needs of the ESL students force a radically different syllabus from that of the overall course, then it would be deceptive to give the same course number and name as that taught in the regular sections; the best alternative, under these circumstances, would be to assign a separate title to what is being taught. This would address the concern that many opponents of exclusive sections have, namely that ESL students should not get the same credit for a course with different requirements, particularly if the requirements are less rigorous or less appropriate to the course's objectives. Once a separate number has been assigned, then the judgment must be made as to whether or not it achieves enough of the original objectives of the course--along with adapting to unique ESL needs--to justify being counted for credit in lieu of the regular basic course. If it does not, then it has to be regarded as a prerequisite for the regular course--and the speech communication department has the unenviable task of seeking approval with appropriate parties for an additional prerequisite course to be taken by international students.

Several questionnaire respondents favored exclusive sections for international students in order to give them yet other relatively unique skills beyond the language development ones inherent in the interactive tasks discussed above. All of the fourteen which actually offered exclusive sections, stressed language problems in the voice and diction area that must be met alongside the more traditional needs of basic course students. For instance, the respondents said:

> "We attempt to be sensitive to the special needs of international students, i.e. working with their language barriers. A particularly skilled instructor in voice and diction teaches this section at our University;" and

> "[We provide] Emphasis on vocabulary, enunciation, pronunciation, nonverbal--some grammar--individual sessions with students to address cultural issues;" and

> "A separate section was necessary to allow for the learning English focus;" and

> "We need to focus on the special phonological needs of native speakers as contrasted with ESL speakers. Additionally, many of our ESL speakers have

grammatical problems, etc., which our native speakers do not have."

This focus on voice and diction appears inherent so long as it does not dilute the regular objectives of the course. If it does, it still might well be necessary, but in a separate course prerequisite to the basic one rather than as material added to or provided in lieu of the basic course. At the same time, one should question whether or not the native speaker in the mainstreamed class should have large quantities of class-time taken for simple voice and diction training necessary for the NNS's.

Those offering special sections or even special prerequisite courses for international students expressed a need for what was not being met elsewhere on their campuses, i.e., a need to improve oral English communication so ESL students could benefit more from their later- integrated classes. The education of many foreign students is being short-changed in mainstreamed classes because of communication barriers. For example, many ESL students, especially the Asiatics, culturally are unaccustomed to initiating orally in the classroom, and will not produce contributions. In 1983, Charlene Sato's study on "Ethnic Styles in the classroom," concluded that "Asians as a group, although greater in numbers than non-Asians, took significantly fewer self-selected turns than non-Asians (30% vs. 66%, respectively of the total turns) with the Asians adhering more strictly to a pattern of bidding for turns in

class . . . instead of just speaking out. Thus, in these classes, Asians' expectations may be denying them their possibilities for manipulating input."[12] As means of countering the tendency for ESL students to withdraw from participation, speech communication instructors need to develop assignments that promote greater voluntary interaction, and to work with these students in exclusive sections, or completely separate courses so they might learn to communicate according to the cultural behaviors in the U.S. classroom; they need to minimize the amount of valuable education which otherwise could be missed by communicative default.

In the public address units of those sections or courses, there can be native guest speakers, videotapes of native speeches, and other means built into the syllabus to facilitate "communicative adaption" as well as transmit cultural values.

At institutions that do have ESL programs, there can be greater effort to determine how the expertise within speech communication departments can be used cooperatively to enhance overall oral communication skills needed by international students in order to make their learning more complete and effective. The needs of ESL students should be more important to us than turf or categories. Patricia Porter et al, of San Francisco State University, recently wrote a textbook entitled Communicating Effectively in English: Oral Communication for Non-Native Speakers. It

contains many materials similar to those in some of our "hybrid" basic course texts, e.g. interviewing, small-group discussion, informative and persuasive speaking, and debating. Along with this are some specifically adapted language materials and exercises. The material could be included in units of a course designed separately from the one taught to all students; or it could be incorporated into a separate section of a hybrid course where one is taught. In the hybrid course section, ESL students can be provided the same nucleus of communication subject matter as in all regular sections while also given more specialized voice and diction and other language training. Where appropriate, there even could be a separate oral communication course taught by an ESL Program, if one should exist on a campus and have conversance with basic speech communication requirements.

Communication departments should not attempt to teach subjects out of their line of expertise just as ESL programs should not. But, the need for oral communication for international students is great and many of our departments can and should provide assistance in that area. Undoubtedly, the nature and form of official academic credit can be determined to the satisfaction of the units involved. Despite apparent prevailing curricular trends in our

discipline, it should be remembered that exclusive sections or exclusive courses in basic communication might better meet the needs of students who speak English as their second language.

Endnotes

1. Marianthi Zikopoulos (ed) Open Doors: 1987/88 (New York: Institute of International Education, 1987), p.vi.

2. Ibid., pp. 1-2.

3. Ibid.

4. A copy of the nationwide institutional questionnaire is Appendix A, and a copy of ESL student questionnaire is Appendix B.

The authors have used as a basis for some of this exposition a position paper prepared for a debate: Robert C. Dick, " A Case for Exclusive Sections of the Basic Oral Communication Course: International ESL Students," Central States Communication Association Convention, Kansas City, April 13, 1989. An unpublished paper.

5. Young Yun Kim, Communication and Cultural Adaption: An Integrative Theory (New York: Multilingual Matters, Ltd., 1988), p. 130.

6. Terrance Albrecht and Mara Adelman, "Social Support and Life Stress: New Directions for Communication Research," in Kim, p.20.

7. Edith C. Churchman, "Developing a Public Speaking Course for Non-Native Speakers of English: Problems and Approaches," Educational Resources Information Center, ED 284427, 1986, p. 245.

8. Craig Chaudron, Second Language Classrooms: Research on Teaching and Learning (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 121.

9. Evangeline Marlow Veronis and Susan Gass, "Nonnative Conversation: A Model for Negotiation of Meaning," Applied Linguistics, Spring 1985, p. 86.

10. Patricia Porter, "How Learners Talk to Each Other: Input and Interaction in Task-Centered Discussions," R.R. Day (ed), Talking to Learn: Conversation in Second Language Acquisition (Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1986), pp. 218-20.

11. Katherine Rulon and Jan McCreary, "Negotiation of Content: Teacher-Fronted and Small Group Interaction," Day (ed), pp. 189-95.

12. Charlene Sato, "Ethnic Styles in Classroom Discourse," Chaudron, p. 105.

APPENDIX A

Questionnaire
Regarding
ESL International Students

Please Complete and Return by February 27, 1989

___ Yes ____ No 1. Do you have basic multiple-section oral communication course(s) at your institution?

If yes, which of the following (check all appropriate).

a.____Fundamentals of Speech Communication
b.____Public Speaking
c.____Other(s)_____

____ Yes ___ No 2. If yes to #1, do you have separate section(s) of the multiple-section course(s) exclusively for international students?

If yes, briefly state your rationale for the separateness (e.g. need to focus on delivery concerns, attention to cultural peculiarities, etc.):

_____
_____
_____

Regardless of whether you answered yes or no to this question, if you have any particular reasons or feelings why there should <u>not</u> be such separate sections, briefly state them (also use back of sheet if necessary):

_____
_____
_____

___ Yes ____ No 3. Do you have special oral communication course(s) designed for non-native speakers of English? If yes, is this course offered in lieu of the basic course(s) mentioned in No. 1?

____ ____
___ ___
Yes No

4. Please give any other comments or opinions you may have on the subject:

_____
_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX B

Questionnaire for International Students

1. Age (Check One): 18-20____, 21-23____,24-26___,over 26_____

2. Marital Status: Single____, Married____, Divorced ____.

3. Sex: Male____, Female ____.

4. Native Country:_____

5. Country of Citizenship:_____

6. If you are not a U.S. citizen, do you plan to become a U.S. citizen: Yes____ No____.

7. Native Language:_____

8. How much <u>formal</u> training in the English language (written or oral or both) have you had? (Please explain)

_____
_____
_____
_____

9. Did you live in the United States prior to coming to IUPUI? Yes____ No____.

10. If you answered "Yes" to Question #9, how long? (Check one) Less than one year ____, 1-2 years ____, 3-4 years ____, 5 years or more ____.

11. Academic Major:_____

12. What do you think are your biggest strengths in English speechmaking:

_____
_____

13. Of the following, what is your main purpose in taking C110? (Check one)
____ For better performance in your other undergraduate classes.
____ For better understanding of English speaking students and professors in the English speaking culture.
____ Other.

15. How would you rate your interpersonal relationships with other students in the class? Excellent ____, Very Good ____, Good ____, Fair ____, Poor ____, Very Poor ____.

16. Why do you feel this way?

_____
_____
_____

17. How would you rate your interpersonal relationships with the instructor? Excellent ____, Very Good ____, Good ____, Fair ____, Poor ____, Very Poor ____.

18. Why do you feel this way?

_____
_____
_____

19. How often do you meet with your instructor? For each assignment ____, Once a week ____, Whenever you need help ____, Almost never ____, Never _____.

20. How often do you seek help from other students in this class: Often ____, Seldom ____, Never ____.

21. How often do you seek help from international students who have taken this class previously? Often ____, Seldom ____, Never ____.

22. Do you feel it is better to have international students in a separate section of C110 rather than having them distributed through all the sections with native-English speakers? Yes____ No____. Why?

_____
_____
_____

23. What is the most difficult thing about this course?

_____
_____
_____

24. What is the greatest contribution this course is making to you?

_____
_____
_____

25. What recommendations do you have for improving this course?

_____
_____
_____

Finally, you are encouraged to call the Chairperson directly so he can arrange to talk with you even more about how the University might better meet your oral communication needs:

Dr. Robert Dick, Chairperson
Communication and Theatre
Phone: 274-0561